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Introduction

Accreditation by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) signifies that a variety of licensure programs demonstrate a high level of quality in programs, candidates, faculty and operations. NCATE accreditation depends in part upon national recognition of individual licensure programs by Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs), and on program approval by state departments of education. In order to demonstrate that programs meet benchmarks of NCATE Professional Standard 1 Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions, the unit must provide evidence of candidate proficiencies based on assessments, rubrics and candidate data that are aligned with professional standards (Retrieved October 22, 2009 from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education at <http://www.npbea.org/ncate.php>). This fact carries with it implications for buy-in at many levels: the university, the unit that offers degrees and/or certificates, and the faculty.

The decision to seek NCATE accreditation affects an entire college or university because NCATE accredits a college or university, and not the unit or its programs. Extensive resources need to be allocated within a time-frame that extends for several years to support and maintain processes that include: initial candidacy for the university, acquiring state approval for all licensure programs at the baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate levels, national recognition from Specialized Professional Associations associated with professional disciplines, the crafting of an assessment system, and the preparation of an institutional report that includes self-study under all six of the NCATE accreditation standards. For the university and for all the schools and colleges not affected by NCATE accreditation, a strong case has to be made to support the educational unit financially through these steps. For a first accreditation this period can extend for more than three years.

The Value of NCATE Accreditation

The case for NCATE is stronger if the unit is able to communicate the following benefits:

1. NCATE accredited schools produce over two-thirds of the nation's new teacher graduates.
2. Graduates of NCATE accredited colleges of education pass ETS subject matter and pedagogy examinations at a higher rate than do graduates of unaccredited colleges of education.
3. Eighty-two percent of the public favors requiring teachers to graduate from nationally accredited professional schools.

4. Approximately seventy percent of the 189 doctoral granting institutions are NCATE accredited or candidates for accreditation. (Retrieved October 22, 2009 from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education at <http://www.ncate.org/public/unitStandardsRubrics.asp?ch=4#stnd1>)

Even when university leadership concurs that these are convincing reasons, the value of NCATE may be unclear or even contentious.

NCATE accreditation imbues value in terms of public perception. It informs the public that the certificate and degree programs were judged to demonstrate high levels of pedagogical integrity by independent judges drawn from across the nation. NCATE accreditation demonstrates that a program, its candidates and its operations are suitably prepared in the content of their professional fields, skills of pedagogy, and clinical practice in classrooms and other school settings. NCATE accreditation further indicates that there has been an external review by at least one professional organization. Such reviews also demonstrate that the performance of candidates has been thoroughly assessed before they are recommended for licensure, and that licensure and degree programs have met standards set by the profession at large.

Seeking NCATE accreditation balances the benefits that are largely perceived against the costs of sustaining accreditation driven activities. Texas deans in 1983 commented that the time and expense of self-study preparation and the NCATE visit are disadvantages. They reported that advantages included prestige associated with NCATE accreditation and possible reciprocal certification benefits among states (Gilman, 1983).

The Perspective of the NCATE Coordinator: Who Is On First?

Widener University is a small, private institution with the Carnegie classification of Research Intensive Professional with a special classification for community engagement. It is our intent to share our perspectives with those seeking NCATE accreditation.

The relationship between faculty and the NCATE Coordinator should reinvent itself at different points along the path to completing a program report. It is the job of the NCATE Coordinator to be actively engaged in teaching faculty how to discover and find intrinsic value in the redesign of programs and assessments, when every decision seems to be governed by a standard or extrinsic goal. Some of the teaching will occur in workshops and clinics. However, the scope of gaining program approval before a first accreditation is so huge that it will also be necessary to be inventive. At Widener University, the NCATE Coordinator conducted workshops and clinics, but more intense collaboration came at meetings that almost resembled writers' conferences. Offices on campus, seminar rooms, beach houses, and restaurants all became places to talk and write, think and revise, suggest and edit, review and validate many drafts of the program reports, one paragraph at a time. This experience taught both the NCATE Coordinator and the faculty that shared leadership is not quite what needs to happen. Instead, leadership needs to shift from one player to another. Much like characters in the Abbott and Costello routine, "Who's on first?" the NCATE Coordinator may have to direct one day and follow the next. Since the NCATE Coordinator has a better understanding of how to fit individual program assessments into the overall assessment guidelines, occasions may arise when a "brilliant" assessment idea will need to be nixed, and faculty governance of curriculum deeply challenged. There will be other occasions when the faculty will need to control of the flow of work as only they really

understand how to align assessment content with professional standards, even when they are not so sure that they do.

The Perspective of the Unit Head

Unit leadership must have a certain level of stability and resilience. In the Center for Education's history of seeking first accreditation, the unit moved from having an outgoing director to an interim director, to a new director who lasted only one year and then to the previous interim director becoming full time. Because of this flux, the NCATE process was continually delayed. Until a unit head was in place that was certain of his /her place and had the requisite knowledge of resources and personnel, the NCATE process could not move forward. In short, seeking a first NCATE accreditation is not a good first year activity for a unit leader. Based on their experiences, the authors offer the following tips to assist other colleges and universities.

Tips for Surviving the Accreditation Process and Achieving Success

1. Blend responsibility and authority. Crane, O'Hern and Lawler (2009) identified four themes that were common to two new faculty members who came into higher education from career positions that carried a great amount of responsibility and authority. When these two faculty members came to a higher education institution, they realized that they still had great responsibility for work that needed to be accomplished; however, because of the nature of higher education and their positions, they no longer carried the weight of authority to carry them in accomplishing the work. This is an important issue in the NCATE process because sometimes faculty who are charged with leading the process of accomplishing the work that needs to be done when seeking accreditation for advanced programs may be new, untenured faculty and/or people who are not in positions of authority. Getting the work done through the power of good relationship skills then becomes critical.
2. Be resilient. Resiliency is an important disposition for all who are involved in striving for NCATE accreditation. In the case of the educational leadership initial program submissions, both the building level program (Principal) and the district level programs (Superintendent and Supervisory) reports were given decisions by the ELCC of "further development needed". This meant that these reports were not yet at the level of recognition by NCATE. Needless to say, the people who worked on these reports were emotionally crushed and had to get up, dust themselves off and then find the time and energy to put in a lot more work and resubmit the reports. It was the hope that the resubmission would at the very least result in the programs being "recognized with conditions", which is the lowest level of recognition but does constitute NCATE recognition. To everyone's delight, the resubmission resulted in "recognized with no conditions", which is the highest level of recognition and accreditation. Resiliency paid off.
3. Establish communication and trust. Beyond stability and resource management, the relationship between the coordinator of NCATE and the unit head must be one of absolute trust and communication. Anything less than this will result in mixed signals to the NCATE team and confusion among the faculty. The NCATE Coordinator must be seen as having the complete backing of the administration. What he/she says must be echoed by the unit head. In the same way, the Coordinator must be willing and able to take the pressure of multiple messages from the unit head while remaining single minded on the pursuit of accreditation. Finances, politics, faculty

pressures, and time constraints should be communicated between these two leaders. The ultimate coordination results in a sort of dance of power that must be choreographed well for final success.

4. Select the Right NCATE Coordinator. The selection process for the NCATE coordinator rested upon the “who has the time” scenario. The first (of many) coordinator was a senior faculty member, who had many skills in organization but who did not have a philosophical connection with the NCATE process. In fact, there was a complete discordance, which led to philosophical stonewalling rather than the moving forward of the process. This led to the move to a second coordinator, who, although she had gone through the process at a local state university, did not have an intimate enough knowledge or the detail drive to move the process forward. This inevitably led to the third tier of coordinators: The untenured “will do everything asked” who moved the process to a certain level but did not have the understanding or the power to convince the more senior and graduate level programs of the applicability, importance or processes of overall program evaluation.

In the final coordinator selection process the least obvious choice was actually the most logical. The coordinator became the most senior faculty member. In the professional culture of the Center for Education it was necessary for this faculty member to take charge in order to move forward.

The coordinator must have certain qualities that include an attention to detail, a willingness to communicate to NCATE on a regular basis, a desire for prolonged conversations and haranguing of faculty, and certain tenacity to put up with the multiple stumbling blocks in the process. Most importantly, the coordinator has to be shielded from the side issues, something an untenured person can never be. The coordinator also must have the power to move the faculty forward. Much like a classroom management strategy, one may need to look to the thoughtful obstructionists for this kind of person.

1. Remember the NCATE Coordinator is there to coach. It may be difficult for faculty to allow themselves to be coached. However, an NCATE coordinator must continually bring the elements of program assessment into focus with the unit assessment system. Faculty may not have the information or the awareness of how this needs to be accomplished. The NCATE coordinator must be given the room, permission and legitimacy to coach faculty to learn, improve and innovate for they must ultimately work toward the common goal of using evidence to improve the quality of programs, faculty, the unit and its operations.

Conclusions

The final determination of whether to move toward national accreditation (NCATE or other) depends on external and internal stressors on an institution. External stressors such as state mandates, market forces, peer institution acceptance, cost-benefit analyses, and perceived value from consumer constituents are important considerations. In this context, success should be seen, not only as the attainment of an accreditation seal of approval, but also as the acceptance of the ongoing intrusion by others (NCATE, SPAs, coordinators, unit heads, technology folks, data-gatherers, peers) into the process of program enhancement. In the end there were certainly be dramatic changes in the way candidate learning is assessed and evaluated.

Current economic trends and institutional pushback may also affect how NCATE and accrediting

bodies transform themselves by sustaining their focus on candidate outcomes and quality, while reducing the burdens of the sometimes redundant reporting of information in various formats. Technological advances may also assist institutions in their ability to collect and analyze data in a more seamless manner that can be communicated to other systems. Buy-in by faculty is essential but will come about only when faculty agrees that evidence-driven accreditation has actually added value to their programs. Any institution must keep in mind the wise words of a veteran NCATE accrediting team member, "Remember, NCATE is not accrediting only your unit, it is accrediting the university" The institution must be ready to value and support the process of continuous assessment and evaluation at every level

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